Going to Work for Dirk

By Chris Volk

From the young boy scampering barefoot through the dirt streets of the tiny mountain village of Michoacan, Mexico, to his current post as head of U.S. Sen. Dirk Kempthorne's Caldwell office, Daniel Ramirez has come a long way.

At 5, Ramirez was an illegal alien almost too young to remember being smuggled into the United States by his mother — she was determined to find her husband who had disappeared across the border two years earlier.

The good news was that his parents were eventually reunited. The bad news was that his father had become an alcoholic and would try to kick the habit for the next 20 years before finally succeeding.

By 6, Ramirez was working in the potato and sugar beet fields around Minidoka. He can show you the scarred finger that was smashed that year while he and his mother were coupling a length of aluminum irrigation pipe. The workdays seemed to be interminable, stretching from 4:30 a.m. until 9 p.m., often seven days a week.

DANIEL RAMIREZ: "Education is the most valuable thing you can have."

CHUCK SCHEER PHOTO

"I often felt like my youth was being taken away," he says. "I didn't go to school because my parents felt that we were there to work rather than get an education." Finally, someone notified the authorities of possible child-labor violations, and Ramirez was enrolled in school. But he was regularly taken out of classes to help with busy times in the fields. When summer rolled around and his friends were off to summer camps to ride horses, shoot bows and arrows, and frolic in swimming pools, Ramirez was bent over in the fields under the blanching sun.

As the seasons turned, Ramirez grew older and stronger. He also grew to assume more responsibility. By the time he was 15 he was managing a field crew of 15. Still, his early formal education left a lot to be desired. By the end of high school Ramirez was sporting a whopping 1.8 grade-point average, hardly enough to get the attention of most college admissions examiners.

"What happened next changed the course of my life forever," he says. John Jensen from Boise State's College Assistance Migrant Program (CAMP) called to see whether Ramirez had considered going to college.

"I convinced [CAMP recruiters], despite my poor grade-point average, I had the initiative and intelligence," Ramirez says. "I felt that what I lacked were the proper tools. And they agreed."

CAMP offers migrant or seasonal farm workers and their children a free year of college. Then, after the first year, students are on their own.

Ramirez admits he was bewildered when he started at BSU in the fall of 1988.

"I was shocked to learn that there were Mexicans who were lawyers and doctors," he says. "And I lacked both study skills and confidence. Looking back, there are two things that really helped me get through BSU: one was the CAMP program, and the other was the Student Support Program."

The Student Support Program assists disadvantaged students through tutoring, study skills training, confidence-development sessions and counseling.

Six years after he began, Ramirez graduated last May with a 3.3 GPA and a bachelor of arts in political science.

"Education is the most valuable thing you can have," he says. "Once you have it no one can ever take it away. The biggest joys and honors in my life are graduating from Boise State University and becoming the first Mexican-American to work for a U.S. senator in Idaho."

He credits Idaho's Republican Party for his career success to date. Why? For a number of reasons, he says. For one thing, it was a GOP-sponsored internship program that first took him to Washington, D.C., as an intern/aid for Sen. Larry Craig. Later, a Republican fellowship program on minority leadership propelled him to Washington, where he met Sen. Kempthorne.

Ramirez says he has political aspirations. His greatest strengths are his compassion for others and his determination to succeed, he says.

"I care about people," he says. "And my early life in the fields where I made $30 a day has been a big motivation for me, though I certainly don't define success in terms of money, but in accomplishing worthwhile goals."

"You know," Ramirez says musingly, " people stereotype Mexicans as being lazy. But think about it. Would you be willing to travel 3,000 miles into a foreign land without a car to work under hardship conditions for minimum wage?" ☐

Breaking Bilingual Barriers

By Glenn Oakley

Unable to speak English, Consuelo Quilantan began first grade in a segregated, all-Mexican Texas school. She graduated from Minico High School in 1964, in the top 20 percent of her class, still speaking only rudimentary English. "I had some teachers who were empathetic and who went the extra mile," she explains. "They allowed me to use my language."

Thirty years later, Quilantan has a bachelor's in education from Idaho State and two master's degrees from Boise State in education.

As administrator of supplementary services for the Nampa School District, Quilantan directs the migrant and bilingual education programs. It is her job to help the 560 limited-English-speaking students, grades K-12, in the Nampa schools learn English and graduate.

Educational techniques for teaching limited-English-speaking students have changed, but Quilantan notes that bilingual education remains very controversial.

And Hispanic dropout rates remain very high. Students are no longer docked one whole grade if caught speaking Spanish, or fined 5 cents per Spanish word spoken, as was Quilantan in Texas. But, she says, classes teaching English remain limited. Presently, says Quilantan, federal funding supports bilingual education in junior-high math and science classes. All grades offer 30-45 minutes per day of English as a second language (ESL) class, she says.

A summer migrant education program, also directed by Quilantan, provides five weeks of instruction for elementary-grade students and evening programs for students in grades seven through 12. Last summer the number of elementary students jumped from a previous average of 200-250 to 400. The evening program drew 150 students, most coming to class straight from the fields. "They're so motivated," she says. "They want their education."

But Quilantan acknowledges, "I have to say that our graduating record for limited-English-speaking students is very low. Mostly they drop out ... They are highly motivated [but] they are extremely frustrated ... It's hard to keep that motivation high when you're failing so much."

Quilantan attributes the failure and frustration to the limited English instruction available in the schools, a lack of Hispanic role models, and the belief on the part of some Mexican students that they will be returning someday soon to Mexico.

"The Mexican people have always come here with the idea they were going back," she says. "My dad who lived here 40 years was always going back." Quilantan says such students must be made to feel like they belong in the schools.

CONSUELO QUILANTAN: "We need more bilingual teachers and curriculum."

She credits a handful of teachers with making her progress through school possible. "I was a migrant all my school years," she says, often in a single year attending school in Texas, Arizona and Idaho.

In Idaho alone she attended schools in Nampa, Marsing and Minico. "My parents always made sure we went to school," she recalls.

Despite low wages and tough living conditions in the labor camps, her parents bought her a dictionary and typewriter for her studies. But neither parent spoke English, and Quilantan learned this new language by osmosis. While she could understand English quite well, her English speaking skills remained limited. One teacher at Minico allowed her to write school papers in Spanish, and then found someone to translate them into English.

For Quilantan, that gesture was as important symbolically as it was academically. "It was that feeling of acceptance and respect for me and my language," she says, that encouraged her to continue and develop her English skills.

Today, she says, "We need all teachers to learn sheltered English teaching techniques [teaching courses in both English and Spanish], and we need more bilingual teachers and curriculum."

Quilantan was among those who helped to design Boise State's bilingual education program, which started in 1977. She recruited Spanish-speaking teacher's aides, many who have earned their teaching degrees and work in area schools.

Still, she observes, anything that has to do with minority education is a political issue. If it were her choice to make, Quilantan says she would divorce language from politics. "I think of it as an educational issue," she states.

When that day comes remains to be seen. ❑

GLENN OAKLEY PHOTO

A Judge of Character

By Chris Volk

At 14, Sergio Gutierrez was a high-school dropout. Today, at 40, he is the first and only Mexican-American appointed to the Idaho judiciary.

The path he followed to his Caldwell, Idaho, post as judge for Idaho's 3rd District Court was neither straight nor narrow. He was born in the state of Chihuahua in northern Mexico and came to the United States at 18 months of age. His father was a Hispanic United States citizen living in California. His mother was a Mexican national.

SERGIO GUTIERREZ: "You try to make a difference as a judge."

As a migrant worker, he was not a very good field hand, in part because he didn't like the work. So he tried restaurant jobs and then smoothed out dents as an auto-body repairman. He also took a high-school equivalency test to obtain his GED.

At 17 he married his 15-year-old girlfriend, Mary. Together, the young couple soon began their family. In 1975 the Gutierrez family drove to Idaho from Washington state in a '69 Chevy van.

"I fell in love with this area," he says. "There was a returning-to-home kind of feeling for us."

In 1976, Gutierrez was recruited by BSU education professor John Jensen to participate in a program to train bilingual school teachers. He and Mary were unable to decide which of them should go to college while the other stayed at home with their two young daughters. So they decided to both go — and to take the kids with them to evening classes after working all day.

Gutierrez recalls keeping one set of eyes and ears turned to the front of the classroom and the other set tuned into his children who were playing with toys and eating their sack dinners outside the door. Soon he graduated from BSU with honors.

"I had wanted to be a teacher, and I was proud to be the first graduate of the new program," he says. "It meant a lot to me because some people had told me that I would not do well in college. But two weeks later I was in law school at the University of California at Hasting."

"It was at this point that I really began to mature," he says. "I began to understand what the family was going through for my education."

CHUCK SCHEER PHOTO

After graduating from law school, Gutierrez returned to Idaho to take a job with Idaho Legal Aid to "work for the underrepresented." He was with ILA for nearly 10 years before joining a Boise law firm. When the firm dissolved, Gutierrez appealed to Key Bank for a loan to start his own firm.

"They took a risk with me, and within a year we had a very successful practice in Canyon County," he says.

His appointment to the bench came last November when Gov. Cecil Andrus selected his name from a shortlist prepared by Idaho's Judicial Council. He took office on Dec. 1. Last May came one of the greatest challenges of his career — a political race to retain his office.

"This was a contested race," he says. "It wasn't one of these 'breezers,' especially since I was new. But I was determined to not have my career short-circuited only six months after getting started."

Gutierrez won. Today, 80 percent of his time is spent hearing criminal cases where a large percentage of the defendants are Mexican-Americans.

"You try to make a difference as a judge," he says. "But what I do is very structural. Still, I very much care about the defendants — as much as I care about protecting society, which is my job."

Gutierrez points to the breakdown of morality and the family unit as the primary reasons people get in trouble today. The antidote, he says, is to build stronger family ties and "neighborhood cohesiveness."

Canyon County Public Defender Van Bishop says he thinks Gutierrez "has an even temperament and tries hard to do the right thing."

"He's much more diligent than other new judges and real compassionate," Bishop says. "And he's got a good legal mind — really good."

Bishop has been representing Canyon County's disadvantaged for 12 years. Approximately 30 percent of his clients are Mexican-Americans. Ironically, he says he thinks Gutierrez delivers tougher sentences to Mexican-Americans than to Anglos. Gutierrez sentencing has "generally been harsher overall, which is bad for the defendant and good for the state." ❑

Empowerment Advocate

By Maria Stafford

Maria Nava knows that one of the few things tougher than being a migrant farm worker is not being one.

A professional advocate of education and opportunity for agricultural workers, she broke through the barriers that tend to keep farm laborers in the fields generation after generation. As a child, she experienced the lifestyle of toiling on farms for survival. As a divorcee in her 30s and parent of three girls, she earned a degree in education from Boise State University. "I did it the hard way," she says.

Nava has long since left the fields, but she has not left the workers behind.

Traveling a rocky road away from a life of low wages and physical labor, Nava knows well the route out of the fields. Now, she works to smooth that route for others.

According to Nava, the average migrant agricultural laborer rarely has the option—or the know-how—to switch careers or lifestyles.

Meanwhile stereotypical American dreams like alternative job opportunities and more freedom to choose a life seem out of reach to many of these workers.

MARIA NAVA: "People may argue with this, but institutionalized racism is alive in Idaho."

CHUCK SCHEER PHOTO

Nava is in her sixth year as the monitor advocate for the Migrant and Seasonal Farm Workers (MSFW) Services of the Department of Employment. Working within the system, she strives to improve the lives of farm workers by keeping them informed about their legal rights and linking them with opportunities in other work areas.

"Empowering farm workers sometimes has to do with educating them as to what recourse is available," Nava says.

Federal law requires the department to offer the same quality of job placement services to migrant and seasonal farm workers as it does to non-farm workers through Job Service offices. To pursue that goal, services are also routinely delivered outside of offices and into the fields.

In enforcing that law, Nava regularly visits and assesses the functions of 11 of the 24 local employment offices in Idaho. Along with some 12 to 15 outreach workers, Nava travels to farms to check on living and working conditions and meet with the workers.

Her responsibilities include ensuring that job information is conspicuous and accessible to farm workers at all local offices; providing bilingual assistance to workers so they can effectively use the information and complete job applications; determining occupational interests and needs; assisting with job searches, including non-agricultural jobs; and referring workers to supportive services that will aid them in obtaining or retaining employment.

"It is definitely a challenging role," she says. "People may argue with this, but institutionalized racism is alive in Idaho."

A constant barrier to supporting migrant farm workers is people's attitudes toward Hispanics, who make up the largest ethnic group in Idaho and the majority of the nation's agricultural labor force.

"We all have prejudices and there's nothing wrong with that," Nava says. "It's how you carry them out. It comes down to respect."

Racist attitudes, lack of money and language skills, and resistance from employers whose interests are best served by a work force lacking options perpetuate a limited lifestyle for many migrant families.

"That occupational group is caught in a cycle," Nava says. "Many want to get out. Some are trapped and never will."

Education is a vital tool to supplying people with the power of having some say about their destiny, Nava says. Migrant farm workers, she adds, need more educational assistance for adults, like the College Assistance Migrant Program, as well as better quality of education for their children.

In a state that ranks among the bottom five in the country for school funding per student, Hispanic children in secondary school have a dropout rate of 40-60 percent. Many of these children drop out for one important economic reason: they need to supplement the family income.

Nava attributes her own academic and job success to a bilingual education in southern Texas and to educated parents who taught her and her siblings how to read and write their native language of Spanish. This works on the premise that children who know one language fully have an easier time learning a second one.

"Bilingual education is the key, and there is still intense opposition to that," Nava says. "It has to begin in kindergarten and first grade; if you lose them then, you've lost them forever." ❑

CHUCK SCHEER PHOTO

Moncrief sees signs that point to a need for "structural changes" in campaign financing.

WHERE HAVE ALL THE DOLLARS GONE?

By Chris Valk

While there is a growing movement to toss incumbents out of office by imposing mandatory term limits, BSU political science professor Gary Moncrief says this is not a good idea.

"I call this the weed-eater approach to political reform," he says. "I think voters will be genuinely disappointed with the result. After you mow the old incumbents out of office, another crop will just grow back in a few years because you're not getting to the root of the problem, which is campaign financing practices."

Moncrief has a few ideas about how our election process can be improved. To substantiate his notions, he has undertaken an exhaustive study of state legislative campaigns.

He and several colleagues plan to comb through the records on candidates who ran for legislative office in some 23 states during 1986, '88, '90 and '92. As far as he can tell, this is somewhere between 20,000 and 40,000 people.

A $193,000 grant from the National Science Foundation (NSF) is funding the project. Five areas of information are being investigated: background information about each candidate; previous election data; current and historical voting records; financing information; and variables such as percentage of seats held by each party and the degree to which legislatures can be considered professional or amateur.

Moncrief got a head start on this project in 1990 and '91 with a $15,000 grant from Idaho's State Board of Education to collect and analyze data from Idaho, Oregon, Washington and Montana.

He drew five key conclusions from this study. First, there has been a dramatic growth in campaign spending in recent years. Second, there is a tremendous variation in the amount of money spent on legislative races from one state to the next. Third, there is an increasing disparity in the amount of money spent by incumbents and their challengers.

Fourth, fewer candidates are running for office each year. And fifth, there is a substantial difference in the amount of money spent in races for senate and house seats, with senate candidates often spending three to four times the money used by house candidates.